Part Four

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One land connects two fathers

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DAEBU ISLAND, South Korea -- A farmer dies, and a soldier survives to take his place.

Two fathers cleaved by half a world, but their fates intersect in Korea.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Lindsay Peifer, Kim Jong Sook and Courtnay Peifer, from left to right, bow at their father's grave, in Umsong. Korean pears, melons -- with tops and bottoms sliced off so they could reach their ancestors -- dried fish and wine are laid out in homage.

Bob Peifer served as an officer on U.S. Army bases in Korea in 1968 and 1969. It was the Vietnam War era, and Dad had an unlucky draft number. It was inevitable that he would serve, but he enlisted to try to manage his destiny. Later, his 17-year-old brother enlisted and chose a tour in Vietnam -- which would become two tours -- to spare his older brothers, who already had families of their own.

Dad was sent to Korea. The uneasy armistice was 15 years old, yet daily gunfire and brinkmanship at the demilitarized zone were routine.

Heightened by the war in Vietnam, the atmosphere was electric. The USS Pueblo was seized by North Korea in January 1968, and the crew was held hostage for 11 months; a North Korean plane shot down a U.S. Navy EC-121 surveillance plane in April 1969, killing all 31 Americans aboard.

While Dad was serving in Siheung, about an hour south my birth father was farming on the island of Daebu. Kim Wan Bae and his wife, Lee Soon Nam, had a 3-year-old son and a newborn son.

Less than 10 years after Dad was safely home in Minnesota, Kim Wan Bae would be dead and the Kim family -- five kids by this time -- would scatter. The Peifer family would pick up the pieces.

One father's death

Perhaps Kim Wan Bae did not believe that death had come for him that day when he was farming in the fields. Perhaps it was instinct that made him cling to life for another nine months, or perhaps he didn't know how not to fight.

Even as the poison coursed through his blood, he wrestled the magpie snake that bit him, caught it and killed it.

A neighbor came running, and tried to suck out the poison from my father's leg. But the poison sickened the neighbor as well and his mouth was swollen for three days before he recovered.

Father's infection advanced, his body swelling as the poison spread to his torso and gradually hardened his liver. He was moved to a hospital, but did not improve. He returned to Daebu, to the house in which my grandfather still lives, on Dec. 29, 1976. He died the next day.

They moved his body, his lips glistening with blood and his skin yellowed, from the house in a wheelbarrow. And they buried him in his chestnut orchard in the mountains behind the house.

Father had toiled the mountainside, clearing existing trees and digging up the roots so he could plant his chestnut trees. He pounded away at the earth to build his legacy. And though he died before he was able to plant his 1,000 trees, 800 of them still stand tall.

Many of the trees seem forgotten, crowded by foliage and lined with overgrown webs guarded by spiders the size of quarters. But I can't help noticing as I rest against the embrace of the highest branches that the weaving boughs look as though they are dancing, as if in silent thanksgiving to the sky.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay hugs Lindsay after looking through their childhood records at the Sung Ro Won Babies Home in Seoul, the orphanage where they stayed before they were placed with an adoption agency.

Father's body no longer rests among his trees. When the family sold the mountain, the new landowners requested that his body be moved.

Today, Father's ashes are at a state cemetery in Umsong, about three hours south of Seoul. The plots are built into a mountainside, and everywhere there are quiet gravestones climbing toward the heavens. My brother-in-law drives us upward, weaving as if climbing a pyramid.

The family gathered to pay homage to his ashes with apples and melons -- first cutting off the tops and bottoms so they could reach our ancestors -- dried fish and wine. First, my brother bowed before his ashes and then my brother-in-law. Next, my twin sister, Lindsay, my sister Jong Sook and I stood in a line, dropping to the ground in unison. We pressed our foreheads to the ground, then stood to repeat the bow once more.

I tried to make sense of this ceremony, reverent but conducted on a mat decorated with the Garfield and Odie comic strip characters. It is just one such intermingling of the past with the present, an odd intersection of images.

Another father falls in love

Much of what I learned about Korea -- the beauty of its mountains and the sweetness of its people -- came from my American dad. And it was his stories, his memories and his photographs that created a bridge between two cultures and two families.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay peers in at children during their visit to the Sung Ro Won Babies Home. Her lone memory of the place was of standing in one of the hallways, where she sobbed as a 3-year-old after getting vaccination shots.

"I was scared to death," Mom said. "I would never have adopted from Korea had your father not gone there and fallen in love with the people and the culture."

Dad served at two U.S. missile bases while in Korea: Siheung, about an hour north of my birthplace and Youngsan, about an hour north of my father's grave.

Youngsan is rural and rests in the mountainous countryside. Siheung is the opposite. The city feels industrial and the humid heat rises from the concrete in a hazy ricochet.

Today there are no reminders of an international presence in Siheung, and nearly no reminders of a base. Golden shards of glass litter the tops of the brick walls, as clear a warning to would-be trespassers as the corresponding barbed wire. There are Korean sentinels and black and yellow roadblocks, but it feels like a façade, like the soldiers are guarding an empty safe.

The most striking distinction between the past and the present is in Seoul.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Lindsay and Courtnay look through their records. They debated whether the two photos were actually the same, showing the same child twice.

Dad's introduction to the city was at the Han River bridge, under which I drank Coca-Cola and watched in-line skaters and lazy-paced bicyclers in the warm river breeze.

Thirty-five years ago, this same bridge told a different story. Riding toward the city, Dad saw something hanging from the bridge. It was a man's body, the body of a North Korean infiltrator who had tried to assassinate President Park Chung Hee in his residence, the Blue House. He had been hanged above the city as an example of what would happen to other would-be assassins.

"It had been hanging there about a week by the time I saw it," Dad said. "But you have to remember it was a different time then."

It was a time when they conducted war games on the islands in the river, which is known today as the "lifeline of Seoul."

Old and new memories

There are threads that connect different families and different eras.

Returning to visit the Seoul orphanage where I once lived, I imagine what Dad must have felt seeing an orphan reach out to him those many years ago, just as I could imagine myself being that child as I enter the nursery school-looking structure.

I remember the hallway.

"Would I have gotten my vaccinations here?" I ask.

"Yes," the guide says.

The hallway is the only thing I remember about the orphanage. This is where I sobbed after getting my shots.

Lindsay has a happier memory; she remembers the trees. "Yes, those trees would have been there when you were here," the guide tells her.

Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtnay Peifer, at a DMZ sculpture that depicts reunification, finds her own reunification -- of her family, of the past and present, and of different parts of the world coming together.

When we walk upstairs, we are bombarded by children. They are clamoring with arms held high, desperate for attention and urging me to pick them up. But when I greet some of them, they grow fearful. Some run away and others kick and scream.

One girl, about 3 years old with wide and serious brown eyes, approaches me, clearing her way through the crowd of eager toddlers. I squat down to be closer to her. She looks into my eyes and says something. I don't understand the words, but the intention is clear: She is making a declaration.

She raises her arms to me. I think she is going to hug me, but I am wrong.

A tale of two families

In the late 1960s, Bob Peifer was serving in the U.S. Army in Korea, based for a time in Siheung. About an hour to the south, Kim Wan Bae was farming on the island of Daebu. Less than 10 years later, Kim would be dead and Peifer would be safely home in Minnesota. And Kim's twin daughters would be starting a journey to the United States and new lives as Courtnay and Lindsay Peifer.

KEY TO MAP

Kim family

1. Birth site of Courtnay and Lindsay.
2. Site of orphanage.
3. Site of Korean father's grave.

Peifer family

1. U.S. father stationed in these cities in the late 1960s.
2.

She reaches up to the top button of my sweater. It takes her three tries as the delicate pearly button slips past her fingers, but she concentrates, biting her lip, and at last she succeeds. She has gotten the button through the buttonhole.

I am impressed; at age 3 I managed buttons by simply tearing them off and ended up wearing snaps and zippers.

She surprises me again. After completing the top button, she moves to the next. It is a struggle, but she buttons it faster this time. She pats the button and sighs, as if saying that is enough for one day.

And she is right. My brother takes my hand, beckoning that it's time to leave. I look at the girl, who most likely will not remember me but whom I will never forget. She doesn't see me take one last glance.

Thursday, August 21, 2003

Short Takes: Can't sleep? Go shopping

Dongdaemun, or "east big gate," comes from the era when Seoul was protected by walls and guards watched over the city at stone gates. Today, it has shopping centers -- about 30,000 vendors -- open until 8 a.m.

Prepare to be jostled. Not that I had to fight for that silk dress with the satin ribbon; it's not a free-for-all. There is simply so much variety and so many shoppers in the narrow aisles that it creates a heightened level of competition. It's certainly not the friendliest place in Seoul, but the prices and selection almost are worth the attitude.

Work up an appetite? Walk across the street and find coffee shops and noodle restaurants ready to appease the munchies. At 2 a.m., we stopped for hot rice cake, which is an iron pan filled with ramen, cabbage, carrots, wontons and spices that simmers over a burner on the table. Add udon noodle soup, kimbap -- sticky rice and vegetables rolled in seaweed -- and kimchi and we stumbled out in gluttonous revelry to our taxi home.

-- Courtnay Peifer